



Girls for Gender Equity Testimony
Before the New York City Council Committee on Education
Oversight: Examining Social-Emotional Learning and Support Staff in Schools

Delivered by Nicole Hamilton, Director of Community Partnerships
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Good afternoon Chair Treyger, and committee members. My name is Nicole Hamilton and I am the Director of Community Partnerships for Girls for Gender Equity. For more than 11 years, I have run GGE's after school and school-day partnership programs for six Department of Education Schools and I continue to serve as a liaison between educators and students.

GGE is an intergenerational organization based in Brooklyn, New York committed to the development of girls and young women. GGE challenges structural forces, including racism, sexism, gender-based violence, transphobia, homophobia, and economic inequity, which constrict the freedom, full expression, and rights of transgender and cisgender girls and young women of color, and gender non-conforming youth of color. We do this work through direct service, advocacy, and culture change. We are offering testimony today because we want to ensure that the most marginalized young people are equipped with the resources they need to heal and recover from the pandemic.

I came before you several months ago in March at the 'Return to Remote Learning' oversight hearing, uplifting the needs of young people as they were shared directly with me and other youth workers at GGE. In August we co-authored a letter to the Chancellor proposing 'A Restorative Reopening Plan for the 2020-2021 School Year' calling for major revisions to strengthen the Bridge to School Plan, which we have found to be an incomplete and insubstantial compilation of broken links lacking the substantive, specific guidance and implementation strategy required for an undertaking as complex, nuanced and important as this.

A week later, in early September, we rallied a group of youth service providers from all across the City to send a list of demands to the Chancellor to impress upon him the urgent need for a comprehensive implementation plan, skilled and experienced practitioners, funding and resources to support the social-emotional well being and mental health of students and staff as they returned to school. A few weeks later in October we were before you yet again to provide testimony on the 'Impact of Reopening on Students with Disabilities', where we again highlighted the inadequacy of the 'Bridge to School' plan and warned against the pathologizing of young people with disabilities which is very common in a system which relies on policing practices and punitive disciplinary tactics as opposed to focusing on the extension of healing centered care.

As we find ourselves now in November, after all of this writing and testifying, it seems as if still, little of substance has been done to address the social-emotional needs of students and staff during this extremely uncertain and challenging time. In fact, the feedback that we are hearing from educators suggests that they are now feeling pressure to prioritize academics over the theory behind a “bridge to school” plan, and so we worry that the commitment to trauma-informed, healing centered schooling has been in name more so than practice. Our conversations with some educators suggest that the plan was not thoughtfully prepared and was rushed to coincide in timing with the start of the school year. Others suggest that the plan consisted of old and outdated material that they had been presented with many years ago, sending a clear message that SEL was not a priority. Already we are hearing that schools have reverted back to business as usual due to the absence of the necessary resources required to make a shift of that magnitude towards healing centered, culturally responsive restorative practices focused on social-emotional and mental health supports.

If you are in a school community that is currently engaging in this type of work that supports the SEL needs of the community in a meaningful way, this basic level of guidance may not be useful to you in addressing the current needs and challenges of your school community. Your school may need more. Conversely, if an SEL focus is new to your school community, The Bridge to School Plan lacks the comprehensive, step by step strategies for implementation needed to ensure that young people are getting the support they need. In short, by failing to provide specific, structured, multi-tiered guidance that considers a variety of baseline entry points and can be implemented with integrity and fidelity across the board, the Bridge to School plan misses the mark and continues to perpetuate the same inequitable system that benefits those with resources and further disadvantages those without.

As it pertains to those who are tasked with the great and challenging responsibility of caring for the mental health and social-emotional wellbeing of students, it is clear and apparent that they must be skilled, prepared, experienced and also be equipped with the tools to manage and navigate their own personal trauma and mental health in order to minimize the risk of causing more harm to students in their efforts to support. I am encountering educators who are so overwhelmed that it becomes extremely difficult to be present in the classroom as they are supporting their own children and families as caretakers – the ask to suddenly become the undertakers of such a monumental task, to them, feels unfathomably impossible.

The mental health of educators themselves is suffering under the weight of all of the stressors of 2020, including the daily uncertainty of the circumstances of their jobs and the lack of priority placed on improving the virtual and blended learning experiences. These oversights have made it nearly impossible for stressed educators to acquire and master the social emotional learning strategies they are being asked to implement. Many teachers are leaving the field of education all together during this time when we need them most. We urge the City to follow our recommendation to engage and compensate skilled community members, practitioners and youth workers to step in to meet the needs and challenges that are most familiar to them and are also ever present at this time. They already have the skills, so why not realign existing resources and support them for their expertise?

There is a lot on the line. The legacy of schooling in NYC is absolutely at stake in this moment. We now know that at least 50,000 young people are not engaging because they do not have a suitable electronic device, however the number of young people who are not logging on for

a variety of other reasons is still unknown. We support the efforts of Councilman Treyger to ascertain that data and also understand that knowing the answer to this question will likely be extremely sobering. We believe that other reasons students are not logging on are not as tactical or logistical as having access to technology. We know that many young people are feeling disconnected from school due, in part, to the absence of appropriate SEL measures in place to respond to their trauma and address their mental health needs. We also know from a focus group we conducted, that the linguistic and cultural barriers that exist due to inefficient DOE outreach and communication strategies, leave families in the dark about all of the constant changes in policy. Without access to the information they need, it is near impossible for these young people to engage in learning.

Finally, young people are not logging on because of the non-restorative ways that conflict and disciplinary interventions are being handled by stressed out staff and administrators. Students are being muted and 'locked out' of zoom classrooms and law enforcement agencies such as ACS and School Safety Agents are being called to intervene and further traumatize young people for issues that can and should be handled by teachers, administration and trusted adults in the school community. These types of punitive, misguided interventions garner similar results in the virtual space as they do when they are used in in person classroom settings, leaving students isolated and extricated from their learning communities.

In the letter we co-authored with Advocates for Children, we called for the DOE to increase social-emotional supports and services for students, particularly those experiencing challenges, by providing all students with access to guidance counselors and social workers and direct mental health supports and services, and by providing students with significant mental health challenges targeted and intensive mental health supports and services. Such supports and services should be provided prior to, and in most instances in lieu of, any exclusionary discipline.

We have failed to create a bridge that can sustain young people during this overwhelming time, and for some, school has become a place of alienation. At GGE we understand SEL to be culturally sustaining, healing centered, restorative, police-free and anti-racist, affirming and liberatory practice. It is not a program or a band aid or even an intervention. It is deeply rooted in community care that seeks to connect all members and stakeholders to one another and to the resources they need to be successful. We can and should look to the model of Community Schools to the Healing Centered School Models and to SEL and restorative justice initiatives.

Healing Centered Practices tell us to be concerned with the entire community as healing happens when everyone's trauma is being addressed and everyone is cared for. The Community Roadmap to Bring Healing-Centered Schools to the Bronx recommends that a citywide, trauma-sensitive, approach should include funding for:

"Healing-centered educational practices (which) have been proven to produce positive outcomes for students' social-emotional well-being, staff wellness, parent/caregiver trust, and school culture." They also call for increased funding for "social workers, adoption of mindfulness spaces and practices, and whole-scale changes to their discipline and safety systems. As part of their changes to safety and discipline, removed all school resource officers from their schools, hired respected community members to provide support and de-escalation in the event of student

conflict, and adopted a suspension diversion program that connects students to long-term mental health resources.”¹

The NYC DOE Office of Community Schools (OCS) offers a viable and replicable model currently operating in 267 schools across five boroughs and serving approximately 135,000 students in New York City. Community Schools provide an evidence based, cost effective track record proving that the investment in holistic support and partnerships with Community Based Organizations (CBOs) and youth service providers yield positive outcomes for young people and their families. Some of the pillars of this model include: Mental Health Supports, Social Services (e.g. Restorative Practices) and Family & Community Engagement.

Now is the time and this is our responsibility. As usual, we are playing catch up in a time of crisis, for If we had doubled down on SEL initiatives to provide the culturally responsive, trauma-informed, restorative practices that young people and staff needed, schools would have already been prepared in this moment to deal with the issues they are facing. However, we did not do that, so now educators who are at their own wits ends are being asked to take on more responsibility and do extremely difficult and taxing work which they are not prepared to do, especially in a time of crisis.

In closing, our asks are as follows:

1. Create a Comprehensive Plan.

DOE central must make this a priority and make it accessible to all schools. Clearly stating the priority and shifts that need to happen in order to ensure fidelity and equity in implementation. This plan must include strategies for schools to make fundamental shifts to center SEL as a focus and not as an auxiliary, ancillary, program, project or one off intervention.

2. Expand the Narrative of SEL.

SEL must be inclusive of all school community stakeholders including young people, teachers, administrators, school staff and families because everyone needs support at this time.

3. Resource the Work.

SEL is not a program or project that can be presented in an online manual. Training, coaching, counseling and other SEL supports must be funded and made available to those who are charged with the task of implementation.

4. Institute a Moratorium on Suspensions.

The DOE must commit to not further traumatize students through policing tactics and harsh disciplinary measures that lead to displacement, exclusion further isolation, removal from learning communities, and push out etc. Remote learning has meant an unprecedented decrease in suspensions. Principal suspensions and child in crisis removals have been reported at an all time low during this pandemic. Structures must be put into place to continue this positive, downward trajectory.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

¹ Authored by the Healing-Centered Schools Working Group, a coalition of parents, students, advocates, educators, and mental health providers working to bring healing-centered practices to all Bronx schools. Retrieved from <https://www.legalservicesnyc.org/storage/PDFs/community%20roadmap%20to%20bring%20healing-centered%20schools%20to%20the%20bronx.pdf>.